The Rise of China:
Security Implications

Compiled by
Dr. Andrew Scobell
Strategic Studies Institute

The U.S. Army War College, the Triangle Institute for Security Studies, and the Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies co-sponsored a conference in Chapel Hill, NC, on March 2-3, 2001. The purpose of the conference was to examine the security implications of the rise of China for the international community in general and for the United States in particular. Approximately 60 individuals attended the conference, including former policymakers, uniformed and civilian members of the Department of Defense, Department of State, intelligence community, business world, and academia. This brief summary highlights the main points raised and discussed during the meeting.

The Challenge of a Rising China.

China boasts the longest continuous civilization in the world and for most of its history has been a major power on the world scene. Although China suffered a period of decline in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, recent decades have witnessed a rebirth of Chinese power. The United States is faced with the challenge of how to respond to a rising China. While the Bush administration, like the Clinton administration before it, wants to see a more democratic China with an economy increasingly shaped by market forces, there is no assurance that these things will happen. But, if current trends continue, the rule of law will be strengthened in China, and the country will become more and more integrated into the world economy. The result will almost certainly be a stronger China but not necessarily one that is more democratic or more pacific. Indeed, a more democratic China may be equally assertive. Research by international relations scholars suggests that rising powers tend to become more aggressive, including those who are in the process of democratizing.

The history of power politics in Asia during the past quarter century is a tale of the decline of two powers (Russia, Japan), the gradual rise of a third (China), and the resurgence of a fourth (the United States). Earlier predictions of a declining United States proved incorrect, and the rise of putative competitors--the Soviet Union (1970s) and Japan (1980s)--each were shown to have feet of clay. In the 1990s China became identified as the new challenger to the United States. Certainly China's rise was an important feature of world politics in the late 20th century, nevertheless, the lead story has been the resurrection of U.S. hegemony. China is very apprehensive about the predominance of U.S. power and would prefer a more multipolar world. Moreover China's Communist rulers are particularly worried about regime survival and internal stability.

It is difficult to generalize about Chinese views of the United States. Popular Chinese views tend to fluctuate depending on events such as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Moreover, the Chinese can simultaneously hold conflicting emotions toward Americans: thus, for example, popular outrage at what was widely viewed as the intentional bombing of China's Embassy in Belgrade can coexist with admiration of American accomplishments and seeing the United States as a desirable place to study and work. Nationalism is a potent force in China but one that can, in frustration, be directed as much against the impotence of the Beijing regime as it can, in anger, be directed against a foreign power.

Is China a Security Threat?

When the threat from China is assessed, capabilities and intentions must both be considered. From the standpoint of capabilities, China offers a limited threat for the time being, although thoroughgoing military reforms and an active program of arms purchases, primarily from Russia, are gradually transforming the People's Liberation Army. In terms of intentions, the arena of strategic culture is important. There is

considerable controversy about the nature of China's strategic culture--whether it is Realist or Idealist--exists. The conventional scholarly wisdom has been that China's approach to international affairs continues to be dominated by its Confucian heritage that devalues the military and abjures the use of force. More recently, scholars have asserted that China's national security outlook reflects a harsh Realpolitik view of power, and Beijing views the use of armed force as an essential element of national power. Certainly, the People's Republic of China has used force regularly over the more than 50 years of its existence.

China at present does not pose a global threat. Despite its growing might, it is by no means a world power. China does pose a proliferation challenge, but it is a more regional (e.g., Middle East) rather than global problem. While China seeks to counter U.S. dominance by pursuing an alignment with Russia, it is in no position to challenge the United States directly. Moreover, Beijing lacks the capability to project power globally with a military heavily skewed in favor of land power. The chief threat China poses, if any, is to the Asia-Pacific region. But with the exception of Taiwan and the South China Sea, China does not directly threaten its neighbors militarily. Still, as China's economy grows and the country becomes more of a maritime power with increasing reliance on imported oil, Beijing may become more assertive in protecting the supply of that oil. Along with this growth will be greater potential to threaten its neighbors. With the exception of Taiwan and the South China Sea, China does not seem to be focused on outright expansion. However, it does seem eager to cultivate patron-client relationships--reminiscent of imperial China's tributary system--with a number of states including North Korea, Burma (Myanmar), and Pakistan.

Asian Great Powers and China.

Three great powers fringe China: India, Russia, and Japan. India appears to be very concerned with the threat from China. There is an asymmetry of threat perceptions between China and India. India sees China as an immediate and serious long-term threat, while China views India as a small and relatively insignificant threat. India sees China's efforts to improve ties with such countries as Bhutan, Nepal, and Burma as an infringement of its security zone. China is satisfied with the status quo, whereas India is not. Still different schools of thought exist in India. One group, representing the Congress Party, holds China in fear. This state of mind springs from India's defeat in the 1962 border war with China. This group seeks to avoid antagonizing Beijing. A second group takes a more pragmatic and strategic attitude toward China. This group, which is concentrated in the present Bharatiya Janata Party government, adheres to balance-of-power politics and recognizes the importance of keeping an on-going dialogue with China. These Indians want to emulate China's reform and rapid growth rates. A third group advocates confrontation and substantial improvement in India's military capabilities, but this group remains in a minority. China does not see India as a serious threat at present, and Beijing is very interested in improving relations with New Delhi. Beijing's response to the Indian nuclear tests of 1998 was surprisingly mild. Some observers believe that China is pulling away from Pakistan, while others contend Beijing is set on maintaining a close relationship with Islamabad.

The relationship between Russia and China has received sizable attention in recent years. There is considerable debate as to whether the relationship constitutes a substantial military alliance or something less consequential and more fleeting. The two countries have some commonality of views on matters such as missile defense, the inviolability of territorial sovereignty, and opposition to U.S. hegemony. A bilateral treaty of friendship and cooperation is likely to be signed later this year. Nevertheless, neither China nor Russia wants to develop their bilateral relationship at the expense of relations with the West. Particularly in the economic realm, both Beijing and Moscow rely heavily on trade with and investment from the United States and other Western countries.

Japan is shifting from what might be called "Liberal Pacifism" with economic considerations being central to "Conservative Realism" where geopolitics is paramount. The former was more prevalent among the older generation and the old style Liberal Democratic Party, while the latter is more common among younger Japanese. There is also another school of thought, what one speaker dubbed "Conservative nationalism"--which is a minority extremist view. Today the Japanese public has an increasingly less positive perception of China. There is more concern about a stronger China. Tokyo is also frustrated about Beijing's obsession with the past--Japan is constantly reminded about its military occupation and wartime

atrocities in China. From the Japanese perspective, there seems to be no end to the Chinese preoccupation with this issue.

Flashpoints.

Three key trouble spots in East Asia are the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and the South China Sea. South Asia has also emerged as a dangerous flashpoint. The balance could easily be tipped towards war in these areas, with disastrous implications for the world at large. The Taiwan Strait presents a particularly tricky situation and is the most likely scenario for a direct confrontation between the United States and China. China claims Taiwan is part of China and has refused to renounce the use of force. Taiwan has become a more assertive actor in the past 2 decades, emerging as a mature democracy and economic dynamo that is eager to take on a greater role in world affairs. China, for its part, has grown increasingly frustrated with this greater assertiveness by Taiwan and at the lack of progress toward a cross-Strait rapprochement. The United States has responded with a policy of "strategic ambiguity."

Korea remains the flashpoint with the most obvious potential to involve the United States into a conflict. Tensions declined noticeably last year with rapprochement between North and South Korea culminating in a summit between the leaders of the two states in June 2000. Relations between Washington and Pyongyang also began to thaw with visits by the most senior military leader of North Korea to Washington and the reciprocal visit of the U.S. Secretary of State to Pyongyang, both in October 2000. However the momentum is in danger of being lost as enthusiasm in Seoul wanes and the Bush administration carefully reassesses Korea policy. There is considerable debate about whether the current regime in Pyongyang can actually change. Some believe fundamental reform is underway in Pyongyang, including a more conciliatory policy toward the United States. Others believe this is merely a tactical ploy, and North Korea is still focused on seizing South Korea militarily. Whether or not this change is for real, for the foreseeable future the Pyongyang regime will continue to confront the United States with serious challenges. A major theater war on the peninsula appears less likely than any number of smaller-scale contingencies. China appears to be a force for stability on the peninsula. Beijing would prefer the status quo or gradual, peaceful change in North Korea.

The South China Sea presents a very different kind of flashpoint --one quite unlikely to be the location of a major conflict. Most of the disputed islands there are uninhabited and remote, and rival claimants to the area all have very limited power projection capabilities. China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei are among the states that claim some or all of the reefs, islets, and atolls that dot the area. China has the largest and most insistent claim. Beijing is very concerned with the sea lanes of communication and the natural resources of the region. China is increasingly dependent on Middle East oil that is shipped via the Strait of Malacca and through the South China Sea. Moreover, China is keen on tapping the fisheries and any energy reserves discovered in the area. Other nonmilitary security threats to the area are piracy--some estimates put about half of the world's pirates operating in the region. Environmental issues could exacerbate regional tensions and possibly lead to limited hostilities, but these are unlikely to escalate or directly involve the United States in a war.

South Asia is a serious flashpoint, with real potential for the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir to spark a major conventional war and even escalate into a nuclear conflict. China figures prominently in the equation because of territorial disputes it has with India and its record of support for Pakistan. However, China has no interest in seeing such a conflict and will do its best to avert a war on the subcontinent. Should a war break out, China will make every effort to stay out of it.

U.S.-China Relations.

China's leadership is experiencing generational change. This transformation is occurring in an environment of uncertainty amid multiple threats to the stability of Chinese Communist Party rule. Chinese elites are particularly concerned about the threat they perceive posed by Falun Gong, the lack of progress on unification with Taiwan, and the pressures of globalization. In the United States a new administration is trying to find its feet. Within the Bush administration there appear to be significant differences on China policy. Furthermore, the wide spectrum of views on China in the United States is represented by different

wings of the Republican Party. China is likely to be a big partisan target for Congress, and it will be extremely difficult for the administration to forge a consensus on China policy.

Security issues also exist: while the United States is concerned about Chinese efforts to modernize and upgrade its military, the Chinese are alarmed because they perceive they are falling further behind the United States in the Revolution in Military Affairs. Beijing is also concerned about U.S. missile defense initiatives. China currently has approximately two dozen missiles capable of hitting the United States. Beijing views deployment of National Missile Defense as threatening because it would effectively cancel out Beijing's deterrent capability. Taiwan is also a particularly challenging issue for both Washington and Beijing. But if all sides are creative and flexible, the situation can be managed. China must be more restrained in terms of the deployment of weaponry in the Taiwan Strait, and the United States must be moderate in its level of arms sales to Taiwan. Perhaps the best check against raising tensions is Taiwan itself. Taipei can be restrained in its rhetoric and actions and convince its supporters on Capitol Hill not to provide weaponry that Taiwan either does not need or is guaranteed to inflame China.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for U.S.-China ties is to overcome the mutual suspicion and animosity that tends to pervade the relationship. Both sides tend to assume the worst of each other. The positive and constructive steps each side makes are frequently interpreted by the other to be isolated responses to pressure rather than initiatives made in good faith. Meanwhile, negative acts are read as being in character. Moreover, it is very difficult for Washington to assess how well the relationship is going. What are the standards by which we can judge how U.S. policy toward China is working?

Conclusion.

The rise of China presents a myriad of challenges for the United States and the other states of the Asia-Pacific region. At present China only constitutes a limited security threat, although its great power ambitions and ever-improving capabilities merit close monitoring. Of the other great powers in the region, only Russia views China as a strategic partner. This is the relationship that deserves the closest scrutiny. The most serious potential flashpoint involving China is the Taiwan Strait, while the Asia-Pacific flashpoint of greatest relevance to the U.S. military remains the Korean Peninsula. U.S.-China relations are likely to be fraught with problems, but even the thorniest problems such as U.S. plans for missile defense and the question of Taiwan can be managed. A future conflict between the United States and China is not inevitable.

Because of the geography of the Asia-Pacific region, the Air Force and Navy clearly play vital and important roles. Nevertheless, the Army continues to play a key role in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in deterring the outbreak of a major war, executing smaller scale contingencies, and engaging the military of China and those of other countries in the region.*

*For more on the Army's role in the region, see Andrew Scobell, *The U.S. Army and the Asia-Pacific*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, April 2001.

* * * * *

* * * * *